

Using Phrases in an ESP Class

By Teresita Rojas Gonzalez

At the medical school of the University of Havana, where I teach English, I use texts with only dialogues and a few exercises. Therefore, I had to develop activities that motivate students, especially the first-year students, and help them develop the four language skills.

This article describes an activity that introduces students to the technical vocabulary for different parts of the human body. The teacher begins by showing a picture of a human body, with some parts named and others not. Then she or he asks the class to name the parts of the body. If no students in the class can answer, the teacher should provide the correct names.

A Question-Answer Exercise

By pointing to selected parts of the body and asking about their functions and their importance, teachers can motivate students, enable them to practice the target vocabulary, and at the same time develop communicative skills they will need in their work with English-speaking patients.

After finishing this activity, the teacher reads a short paragraph containing some phrases or expressions that include names of parts of the body. The teacher then asks at least two comprehension questions. Usually students do not know the meanings of these words, so the teacher may need to explain them in a way that enables students to understand what levels of informality are appropriate or inappropriate on given occasions, and where, when, and with whom they can use this kind of language. Examples of such phrases follow:

Bone: I have a bone to pick with you. (I have something to complain about to you.)

Ear: My ears are burning. (I think that other people are talking about me.) I am all ears. (I am keen to hear everything.)

Eye: Eyes down! (A call to start a game.) Keep an eye on it. (Take care of something or someone.)

Hand: A big hand for our best pianist in town! (Let us welcome this person by clapping.) All hands on deck! (Everyone must report to work.)

Leg: Shake a leg! (Hurry up!)

Tongue: It's on the tip of my tongue. (I cannot quite remember, although I am thinking hard.)

Learning-practicing

The teacher asks the students in pairs to write short doctor-patient dialogues about a medical topic using some of the phrases they have learned. Then students dramatize their dialogues in class.

The teacher follows up by requesting that students write paragraphs in which they use some of the given phrases. These are read aloud in class, and students make comments on their classmates' paragraphs.

Conclusion

Teachers of English need to be creative and innovative. Activities like these make vocabulary learning enjoyable and enable students to develop a sensitivity toward the language. When students understand words and phrases and use them in real situations, they can communicate better. These activities also enable students to demonstrate the optimal use of different learning techniques and participate actively in their learning.

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